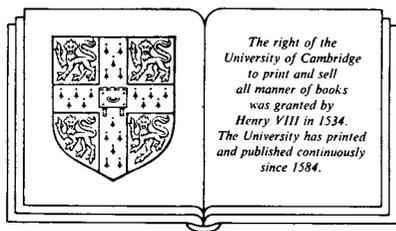

*Revolution and
Foreign Policy
The Case of South Yemen
1967–1987*

FRED HALLIDAY



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Introduction: the foreign relations of South Yemen

This study is intended to be a contribution to three distinct areas of investigation – the modern history of the Arabian Peninsula, the foreign policies of Third World states, and the international consequences of revolutions. Each is an area on which a substantial amount has been written in recent years, and it is hoped that the analysis in detail of twenty years of South Yemen's foreign policy will contribute to this literature, to a better understanding of this part of the Middle East, and to more documented study of some of the broader, comparative issues involved.

The literature on the Arabian Peninsula, and on the Yemens in particular, has expanded greatly since I first began working on this area in the late 1960s. There is now an international community of people writing on this region to whose labours I owe a special debt of thanks, both for the research which they have published, and for the encouragement which the very existence of a wider community of scholars provides.¹ While part of the Arab world, the two Yemens have distinctive characteristics and recent histories that make the analysis of their policies challenging and rewarding. Among these are the relation of social upheaval to foreign relations, especially important in regard to the two Yemens; the tense relations between oil-producing monarchies and the, until very recently, oil-less republics; and the specific impact on the Peninsula of regional issues – not only the Arab–Israeli dispute, but also those of the Horn of Africa and of the Persian Gulf. The second theme, the comparative study of foreign policies of Third World states has also greatly expanded in the past decade, as it has become possible to assess the first years of post-independence decision-making and policy implementation in a range of Third World countries. It is the great strength of this literature that while not seeing Third World states as unique, it does identify a range of specific problems and trends evident in their foreign policies.² This is particularly so with regard to regime security, economic development, and nation formation, all issues central to the evolution of South Yemen's foreign policy.

The third dimension of this study is that of the comparative analysis of how revolutionary states conduct their foreign policies. For all that is individual to such states, certain underlying questions recur: the commitment to supporting like-minded movements in other, often neighbouring, states and the difficulties such a commitment encounters; the effects upon foreign policy of factional divisions within the revol-

utionary states and, conversely, the impact of external forces upon the politics and economic structure of the state; the search for strategic allies, to guarantee the survival of the revolutionary state, and the issues of autonomy and consultation which such alliances pose; the manner in which, over a longer time span, the revolutionary state balances its desire to maintain beneficial relations with other states, including quite conservative ones, and the commitment to supporting change on an international scale. The common-sense assumption is that revolutionary states begin with an internationalist commitment to promoting change and then, over time, accept the constraints of the international system and the permanence of other, initially contested, political regimes: but this oversimplifies the question, not least because such a transition may cause considerable tension within the revolutionary state itself. How states manage, and justify, such transitions is itself an important part of a comparative study, as is the manner in which former counter-revolutionary opponents handle their accommodation. The passage of time may also pose another problem, namely the emergence in the same region of other revolutionary states with whom relations may not be of the easiest.

Rather than attempting to establish a comprehensive, empirical record, the analysis aims, within the constraints of the available information and space, to elicit some themes in South Yemeni foreign policy that are both significant in themselves and of broader, comparative interest. It is this selective approach which has guided the choice and ordering of the different chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 establish the domestic context of South Yemen's foreign relations and the broad lines of foreign policy determination. They chart the transfer of power from Britain, the determination of the regime's foreign policy in the years after independence by successive governments and congresses, and the impact of factional conflicts on foreign policy. The four chapters that follow each focus upon a major theme in South Yemen's foreign policy. These chapters analyse both the reasons for this policy being a central one and the manner in which policy on this issue has developed.

Chapter 3 discusses South Yemen's policy towards political and economic ties with the west. While all transitions from colonial rule to independence involve an element of discontinuity, the degree of discontinuity, even rupture, attendant upon decolonisation in South Yemen was greater than in many other post-1945 instances. The question arises of to what point such a radical or revolutionary decolonisation was taken, not only internally but also internationally, and what the costs of this kind of decolonisation were. This issue is posed with especial force in regard to two aspects of South Yemen's foreign policy: its diplomatic relations with the west, and its ties to western economies, upon which its prosperity had hitherto relied.³

The second theme in South Yemen's foreign policy to be analysed is the claim that the PDRY was only part of a divided country, a 'greater' Yemen encompassing the two states of North and South Yemen, as well as, on occasion, parts of Saudi Arabia. This comprises the material of Chapter 4. The problem of national unity has arisen in many other parts of the contemporary world. This has been the case in Germany and Korea where two distinct states have come into existence since 1945. It has also been so in, among other places, Mongolia, China, Bengal, Somalia, and Ireland: in these cases independent and distinct states have claimed that part of their national territory remains under the control of another state. In many of these, 'unity' and territorial claims persist even where realisation of 'unity' seems remote.⁴ It is not necessary to believe that unity of the two Yemeni states was feasible to see that the issue of 'unity', and of the conflictual but persistently intimate relations between the two states, was an important factor in South Yemen's foreign policy, not least because here the issue of national unity intersected with that of promoting change in another state. The history of policy on Yemeni 'unity' provides an example of interaction between two states of similar national but divergent social characters that is pertinent to some of the other instances.

South Yemen's foreign relations with neighbouring states are of interest for a further reason, namely the intention which they embodied of encouraging revolution in other states of the region apart from North Yemen. This topic forms the subject-matter of chapter 5. As much as any state in this century that has issued from a revolution, South Yemen sought to conduct its foreign relations at two, often contradictory, levels – that of inter-governmental relations with other states, and that of relations with revolutionary forces within other states, ones that were seeking to overthrow the existing governments. This commitment to opposition groups was true of South Yemen's relations towards all three of its land neighbours – Saudi Arabia and Oman as well as North Yemen – and towards other, more remote states in the region – Ethiopia, Iran and Israel. Despite its lack of many of the resources that make for a strong or resilient foreign policy, South Yemen persisted for many years in such support to radical groups beyond its frontiers. Chapter 5 seeks to chart the extent of this support, to analyse the factors maintaining it, and to see under what conditions it abated.⁵

Chapter 6 analyses the quest for allies, how this orientation in favour of revolution in the region was accompanied by the development of a multifaceted relationship with the USSR, the state which from the late 1960s was the main supporter of South Yemen in the international arena. While this alliance with the USSR was more far-reaching than that of any other Middle Eastern state with Moscow during this period,⁶ in a comparative Third World perspective South Yemen's record was not so

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exceptional. The PDRY was one of over a dozen Third World non-communist countries that developed close relations with the Soviet Union in the post-war years. South Yemen therefore provides a case study of such relations: of the impact of Soviet policies upon an already radicalised Third World state, of the manner in which the relationship developed, of the problems that arose, of the constraints involved on both sides in such an alliance, and of what factors sustained it. Relations with China, subordinate to those with the USSR but nonetheless continuous, are also discussed in this chapter.

These four factors – renegotiated relations with the west, the vicissitudes of the Yemeni unity question, the pursuit of a revolutionary foreign policy in the region, and the pattern of ties to the communist bloc – indicate dimensions in which PDRY sought to conduct its foreign policy and in which, beyond its particular Middle Eastern interest, the foreign policy of South Yemen may repay closer and more systematic examination.

There are, however, two substantive objections which a proposal of this kind may occasion. The one is that there is as yet insufficient empirical material available upon which to base a study of South Yemen's foreign policy. The country has been independent for only two decades, and the events which are being described and analysed may therefore be too recent to permit of serious study. Moreover, South Yemen has conducted its foreign policy amidst conditions that are unfavourable to academic investigation: its decision-making bodies are secretive, its press is confined to endorsing official policies, foreign policy has already become an issue of too much dispute within the ruling party to permit of accurate discussion inside the country, and there is little independent access to much of the material relevant to a study of its foreign policy. Secondly, it can be argued that, as a state, South Yemen is too insignificant to merit analysis of its foreign policy: a country of less than two million people, amongst the poorest in the world, with little economic, political or military weight in international affairs, and geographically on the margin of the Middle East, in only the more limited senses might the PDRY be said to have a foreign policy at all, if by this is meant the capacity to influence other states or autonomously to determine its relations with the rest of the world.

Both of these objections pose valid questions. There is much that we do not know about South Yemen's foreign relations and which, given the reticence of its government, the factionalism of its leaders, and the probable lack of written documentation on many issues, we shall, in all likelihood, never know. No-one who tries to follow developments in South Yemen can be unaware of the gap between the two available

discourses – the official language of socialist theory and class categories, and the unofficial, spoken discourse of personalities and tribal affiliation. Yet the temptation to reject either must be resisted, since both have an effect. In the context of world affairs as a whole, South Yemen is certainly one of the weaker states, without even the power or influence of many of the other countries in the Middle East. Yet these two constraints do not entail that investigation of South Yemen's foreign relations is impossible, or without justification. In addition they need to be offset against the ways in which the topic is of interest both as a study of an Arab state's foreign policy and in a comparative dimension.

The sources used in the following study fall into three categories.⁷ There are, in the first place, official statements of the South Yemen state and ruling organisation. Texts of South Yemen policy can be found printed in reports of party congresses and in the South Yemen press, in the BBC's transcripts of radio broadcasts, and in special, often occasional, publications issued in Aden and by embassies abroad. Complementing these are official materials from other interested parties – governments, international organisations, non-governmental groups – with whom South Yemen has had relations and/or been in conflict. Secondly, there are publications of an unofficial kind containing relevant information on the PDRY – newspapers, journals, books and compilations of specialist data. Whilst frequently inaccurate and unreliable, these nonetheless perform an important function in outlining the course of events and of policy: they can be used with appropriate caution. Thirdly, there are my own first-hand observations of South Yemeni foreign policy based on four research visits to the country – in 1970, 1973, 1977 and 1984 – and on numerous interviews, on and off the record, conducted with South Yemeni officials since 1969.⁸ These interviews have themselves been accompanied by discussions with officials of many other states and organisations that have been in dealings with South Yemen over the same period. Amongst those whom I have interviewed are officials of Britain, the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Democratic Republic, the USA, Cuba, the USSR, China, Israel, Egypt, Algeria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, North Yemen, Iran, Somalia, and Ethiopia, as well as representatives of several guerrilla groups supported, at one point or another, by South Yemen. Taken together these three categories of material provide a definite, albeit limited, basis for establishing and analysing the record of South Yemen's foreign policy in the period under discussion.

The argument of insignificance is equally debatable. No state is so powerful that it can operate without constraint, internal and external, and impose its influence beyond its frontiers as it might like. No state is so weak that it cannot be said to have a foreign policy, in the sense of being

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able in some measure to determine its external relations – be they political, economic, military or cultural – and to have some impact upon those of others. The arguments of insignificance might exclude study of the foreign relations of many states in the world, and overstate the degree to which a meaningful foreign policy can only be conducted by states with a measure of power that was above a certain supposedly definable level. It might, above all, underplay the extent to which smaller states can indeed play a role of some influence in international affairs, autonomous of, if not independent from, the stronger powers of the region and world in which they find themselves.

While placing greatest emphasis upon relations between states, this study does, at appropriate points, go beyond the confines of state-to-state relations, predominant as these have been in the course of South Yemen's foreign relations. There are four respects, at least, in which the analysis of state relations is here supplemented by additional considerations. In the first place, a part of South Yemen's relationship with the outside world involved not states but international organisations: the UN, the IMF, the Arab League, the CMEA, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Islamic Conference Organisation. South Yemen sought to play a part in these and to receive support from their membership. Secondly, South Yemen devoted considerable attention and, at times, resources to relations with non-governmental organisations, most evidently guerrilla groups seeking to overthrow established governments in different countries of the area. The most obvious cases of these were guerrilla movements in Oman, North Yemen, and Eritrea, and among the Palestinian resistance. Thirdly, as a country of exiguous material resources and one historically reliant for much of its prosperity upon foreign economic contacts, South Yemen had to pay particular attention to its economic links with other countries, whether through trade, aid or investment, or through the remittances of its emigrants. This salience of economic relations was important in its own right and as a factor shaping more general foreign policy decisions. Finally, as in the analysis of other countries, the study of South Yemeni foreign policy necessitates examination of the domestic forces shaping that policy and of the institutions and constitutional stipulations affecting it. Analysis of the internal context of foreign policy determination involves both the internal arrangements made for foreign policy to be conducted, and the manner in which South Yemen's foreign policy intersected with the course, orientations and conflicts of international politics. The impact of factionalism on foreign policy is characteristic of revolutions in general: that of the PDRY has been no exception.

The premiss of what follows is that there was something distinctive and significant about the foreign policy pursued by South Yemen after

independence. It was distinctive because of the internal changes preceding and accompanying the execution of this foreign policy, changes that merit the term 'revolutionary'; as a result of these, the country's foreign policy differed from that of other states in the region with more continuous and traditional internal arrangements. It was significant in that it shows how, with all the limitations upon it, even a small and economically weak state such as South Yemen could nevertheless pursue a foreign policy that was to some degree of its own choosing. There was certainly much that was rhetoric and not capable of realisation, and there were commitments to change that were, over time, reduced and then terminated. But this was itself an interesting process, of the shifting reconciliation of programme and reality. It can be fruitfully examined in smaller states as it can in large.

This study covers what is a discrete, but ultimately unresolved, period in South Yemeni foreign policy. The public commitment to revolutionary change in two neighbouring states, North Yemen and Oman, was modified in 1982 by agreements with the government of these two countries, and a phase of apparent calm ensued: but this interlude was threatened by the crisis of January 1986 in South Yemen, the external consequences of which remain obscure. This partial reconciliation of 1982 apparently marked the end of a phase of upheaval in the South Arabian region that had begun twenty years before, with the North Yemeni revolution of 1962, and which had included the conflict in South Yemen in which the National Front had come to power.⁹ But the 1986 crisis destabilised the regime internally and threatened to reopen conflict with North Yemen and other Arab states. The longer-run direction of South Yemen's foreign policy must, therefore, await the passage of more years, until the consequences of the 1986 crisis become clearer. It is nonetheless possible, on the basis of the record as so far available, to establish in some degree the initial contours of this unusual, twenty-year-long experience of post-independence diplomacy.